**[The War of the Shifting Sands](javascript:void(0))** / Micky Neilson

The midday sun fixed its unflinching gaze upon the sands of Silithus, bearing mute witness to the multitudes forming ranks outside the Scarab Wall.

It continued its passage, though to the masses gathered below, it seemed as though the orb had stopped to cast down unrelenting waves of heat until the vast armies simply collapsed from exposure.

Amid the restless formations a lone night elf stood in quiet contemplation. Her companions eyed her with admiration; some, almost reverence. The others who were gathered--an assortment of representatives from every race in every land in the known world--viewed her with their own racial prejudices. After all, the blood feud between night elves and the likes of trolls and tauren dated back centuries.

No matter their affiliations, however, all who had come to battle that day shared one sentiment for the night elf: respect. Shiromar was like the sun above--impassive, unwavering, and unflinching. These qualities had served her well in the recent months, providing her with the strength to continue when all seemed lost; when the quest seemed neverending; and when her companions had simply given up.

There had been the watcher, and the Caverns of Time; there was the bronze dragon and the Broodlord and the squirming insect hives; then there were the shards and their keepers, the ancient dragons, none of whom would give up their charge easily. Coercion, ingenuity, and sometimes outright violence, all were employed to accomplish the task.

And all of this for one item, the item gripped in Shiromar’s hands even now: the Scepter of the Shifting Sands, reformed at last after a thousand years.

In the end, all roads had led here, to Silithus, and to the gates of the Scarab Wall. Here, where the Scepter was shattered.

Shiromar looked up at the sky and remembered a time when the sun had been eclipsed by dragons; when the Qiraji and silithid flooded over the legions of night elves in seemingly eternal waves; when hope seemed but a shadow. It seemed as if none would survive those terrible months; yet here she was, standing before the sacred barrier that saved their lives all those years ago, during the War of the Shifting Sands…

Fandral Staghelm led the charge, his son Valstann at his side. They had chosen the gorge so that their flanks would be protected against the unending flow of silithid. Shiromar was close behind the front line, casting spells as quickly as her energies would allow.

They had fought their way to the mouth of the gorge, Fandral and Valstann accompanied by the most battle-hardened sentinels, keepers and priestesses, with the druids healing and casting exhaustively. It seemed that for every massive cluster of silithid that was destroyed hundreds more would take their place. So it had been for the past few days, since word of the silithid incursion had first arrived and Fandral had sounded the call to arms.

The priestess Shiromar and her companions had all regained enough energy to call upon the grace of Elune simultaneously; they now watched as a blinding column of light obliterated the swarm blocking the gorge’s terminus.

Then, a low buzzing sound filled the air. One by one, flying insect creatures--the winged Qiraji, flew over the lip of the gorge and down, striking at the druids in the supporting positions.

Fandral led the front lines from the gorge into the open sands, stepping over the corpse-mounds of the silithid. The air was alive with the thrumming of the Qiraji as they swooped down and slashed with clawed appendages. Fandral pressed forward to allow the supporting ranks room to spread out.

As she looked to a ridge in the distance, Shiromar witnessed swarms of land-bound Qiraji pouring over the crest like ants swarming from a hill. A towering monstrosity lumbered into view, swinging clawed limbs, looming over all, shouting commands to the insect soldiers.

Among the chattering and droning of the swarms, one sound seemed to repeat in the presence of the commanding warrior: Rajaxx, Rajaxx… though Shiromar did not understand the Qiraji’s communications, she wondered if that might not be the creature’s name.

As the next wave of Qiraji drew near, a great horn sounded: from the east and west, multitudes of night elves charged onto the field. With a blood-curdling cry Fandral and Valstann pressed straight into the heart of the oncoming swarm; the two sides clashed and melted into each other as the newly arrived forces crushed in on both flanks.

Shiromar felt for sure that they had won out; but as the shadows grew long and day proceeded into night, the battle continued. In the center of the fray, Fandral, Valstann, and the Qiraji general clashed in a desperate struggle.

As Shiromar narrowly avoided several attacks from the winged Qiraji, she glanced to where the general battled father and son. The numbers of the Qiraji were dwindling, and the general seemed to sense this, for with a mighty leap he bounded away, back to the ridge where Fandral had first spotted him. From there he disappeared and the few remaining insect-creatures were quickly eradicated.

That evening watches were set as the night elf forces rested. Fandral knew that the Qiraji threat had not fully been quelled, and he expected the battle to begin anew the following morning. Throughout the night Shiromar slept only in brief increments, the din of battle still ringing in her ears, though the surrounding desert remained quiet.

With morning, as the troops reformed and pushed on to the ridge they were greeted by an eerie stillness. Shiromar scanned the horizon but the Qiraji and silithid were nowhere to be seen. As Fandral prepared to press on, a messenger arrived with dire news: the town of Southwind Village was under attack.

Fandral considered pulling the troops back to defend the village, but he sensed that such an action would only leave an open door to invasion from the remaining Qiraji. They still had no idea of just how many the insects numbered, or even if they had seen all that this new race had to throw at them.

Valstann correctly guessed his father’s thoughts and offered to lead a detachment to the village so that Fandral could stay and provide containment.

Standing close by, Shiromar heard the rest of their conversation play out:

“It could be a ruse.” Fandral said.

“Surely we can’t take that chance father.” Valstann answered. “I’ll go. I will defend the city and I will return victorious, upholding the honor of your name.”

Reluctantly, Fandral nodded. “Just return alive and I will be more than satisfied.”

Valstann gathered a detachment and Fandral watched his son depart. Shiromar worried that their forces were divided, but she understood the necessity of the action.

For the next few days Shiromar and the others battled wave after wave of silithid streaming from the hives scattered throughout the land. Still, the Qiraji remained unseen. A feeling of dread began working its way under Shiromar’s skin; she felt it a bad omen that the silithid’s masters had not appeared for so long. She worried over the fate of Valstann, and at several points throughout each day, during lulls in the continuous butchering she spied Fandral quietly looking back over the horizon, anxiously anticipating his son’s return.

On the third day as the noon-day sun reached its zenith, the Qiraji appeared, their numbers reinforced. Once again the buzz of insect wings stirred the air; once again interminable multitudes crested the rim of the horizon. They spread out before Fandral and the others like the shadow cast by a giant cloud obscuring the sun… and stopped.

And waited.

Fandral formed his lines and stood at the forefront of the ranks as Stormcrows circled overhead and Druids in bear form clawed the dirt in anticipation, all watching intently. Moments later the ocean of insects parted, and the hulking form of the Qiraji general approached, carrying a wounded figure in its clawed appendage. It proceeded to the front of the Qiraji lines and held Valstann Staghelm aloft for all to see.

Gasps spread throughout the ranks. Shiromar felt her heart sink. Fandral stood mute, knowing that Southwind had fallen, and fearing that his son may already be dead. He cursed himself for allowing the boy to leave and stood, frozen by a mixture of fear, anger and despair.

Within the general’s claw, Valstann stirred and spoke to the general, though he was too far away to be heard.

At once the spell that had fallen over Fandral broke and he bolted forward, followed by the night elf forces, but the distance was great… and even before the Qiraji general acted, Shiromar knew they could not reach Valstann in time.

The Qiraji general fixed his second claw onto Valstann’s bloodied form, and with both he squeezed… and pulled apart, separating the young night elf’s body at the waist.

Fandral slowed, faltered, and fell to his knees, the onrushing night elves parting around him. As the two forces finally clashed, a sandstorm rushed in from the east, blocking out all light; choking, stifling. Shiromar felt the winds force her movements nearly to a halt. She blocked her eyes as best she could, the howling wind buffeting her ears, drowning out the sounds of battle and the screams of her dying comrades.

Through the chaos she glimpsed the murky, behemoth shadow of the Qiraji general not far away, slashing and reaping through rows of night elves like a harvester shearing wheat. Then she heard Fandral, his voice ghostly through the storm, calling for the armies to fall back.

Much of what followed seemed to happen rather quickly, although in fact it took days: Fandral led his forces out of Silithus, through the mountain passes and into the bowl of Un’Goro Crater, the silithid and Qiraji legions never far behind, consuming those who fell just beyond the protection of the primary force.

Once inside Un’Goro however a strange thing happened: word spread throughout the ranks that the Qiraji had fallen back, just as the forces had passed the edge of the crater. The Arch-Druid gathered the remaining troops in the bowl’s center and gave the order to stand fast. Finally, a lull had come in the fighting, fleeing and dying. But the night elves had suffered a bitter defeat, and Fandral Staghelm’s demeanor had changed irrevocably.

Shiromar watched as Fandral stood guard, looking out from Fire Plume Ridge, the steam of the volcanic vents rising behind him, the orange lava glow illuminating his face, a mask that concealed the deepest anguish--a sorrow known only to parents who have outlived their children.

The sudden retreat of the Qiraji puzzled Shiromar. The more she thought on the subject, the more she remembered the legends surrounding the Crater, rumors that it had been built in the primordial age by the gods themselves. Perhaps they watched over the land. Perhaps their blessings still anointed this place. One thing however was for certain: if a plan was not devised to stem the tide of the insect race…

Kalimdor would be lost forever.

The War of the Shifting Sands continued for long, agonizing months. Shiromar managed to survive battle after battle, but always the night elves were on the defensive, always outnumbered, always being driven back.

Out of desperation Fandral sought the aid of the elusive bronze dragonflight. Their initial refusal to interfere was reversed when the brazen Qiraji attacked the Caverns of Time, home and province of Nozdormu the Timeless One.

Nozdormu’s heir, Anachronos, agreed to enlist the bronze dragonflight against the marauding Qiraji. Every able-bodied night elf joined the cause, and together they forged a campaign to retake Silithus.

Even with the might of the dragons backing them, however, the sheer numbers of the Qiraji and silithid proved overwhelming. And so Anachronos called upon the progeny of the remaining flights: Merithra, child of Ysera of the green flight; Caelestrasz, child of Alexstrasza from the red, and Arygos, child of Malygos from the blue.

The dragons and winged Qiraji clashed in the cloudless sky above Silithus as the whole of the Kalimdorian night elf forces streamed in across the sands. Even so, it seemed that the numbers of Qiraji and silithid were never-ending.

Shiromar later heard whispers that the dragons flying above the ancient city from which the Qiraji emerged saw something distressing there; something that hinted at a more ancient, terrifying presence behind the onslaught of the insect race.

Perhaps it was this revelation that spurred the dragons and Fandral to hatch their final, desperate plan: to contain the Qiraji within the city, to erect a barrier that would confine them until a more hopeful stratagem could be devised.

With the aid of the four dragonflights, the final push to the city began. Shiromar marched behind Fandral as the corpses of the winged Qiraji fell from the sky. High above, the dragons were making short work of the insect soldiers. As one the night elves and dragons formed a moving wall which pressed the Qiraji back toward the city of Ahn’Qiraj.

But near the city gates, the tide turned, and it was all the combined forces could do to hold the line. To push any further would be impossible. Merithra, Caelestrasz and Arygos decided to push into the city and hold the Qiraji back long enough for Anachronos, Fandral, and the remaining druids and priestesses to create the magical barrier.

And so the three dragons and their companions flew headlong into the Qiraji legions, into the city where they hoped their sacrifice would not be in vain.

Outside the gates Fandral called upon the druids to focus their energies as Anachronos summoned the enchanted barricade. Beyond the gates, the three dragon progeny succumbed to the overwhelming forces as the Qiraji surged forth.

Shiromar concentrated her energies and called upon the blessing of Elune as the barrier erected itself before their eyes, rock and stone and roots from beneath the sands emerging to create an impenetrable wall. Even the winged soldiers who attempted to fly over the barrier met with an invisible obstruction that they could not pass.

The Qiraji who remained outside the wall were quickly slain. The corpses of Qiraji, night elves and dragons littered the bloody sands.

Anachronos motioned to a scarab scuttling below his feet. As Shiromar watched the creature froze, then flattened out, transforming into a metallic gong. Stones shifted into place near the wall, creating a dais where the gong was finally placed.

The great dragon then proceeded to the severed limb of one of his fallen companions. He held the appendage and after a series of incantations, the limb morphed into the shape of a scepter.

The dragon told Fandral that should any mortal ever wish to pass the magical barrier and access the ancient city, they need only strike the scepter against the gong and the gates would open. He then handed the scepter to the Arch-Druid.

Fandral looked down, his face twisting in contempt. “I want nothing to do with Silithus, the Qiraji and least of all, any damned dragons!” With that Fandral swung the enchanted object into the magical gates--where it splintered in a shower of fragments--and walked away.

“Would you shatter our bond for the sake of pride?” the dragon asked.

Fandral turned. “My son’s soul will find no comfort in this hollow victory, dragon. I will have him back. Though it takes millennia, I will have my son back!” Fandral then strode past Shiromar…

… who could see him in her mind even now, as if it were only yesterday and not a thousand years past.

One by one, the gathered forces of Kalimdor looked to her, waiting. She struck out toward the dais, passing humans and tauren, gnomes and dwarves and even trolls, races whom her kind had fought against, who were now united to end the threat of the Qiraji once and for all.

Shiromar stood at the base of the steps and took a deep breath. She climbed to the top of the dais and hesitated only for a second. Then, with one mighty swing, she smashed the scepter into the ancient gong.